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FILE American hostage freed, six others still captive

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The Rev. Benjamin Weir, a Presbyterian missionary kidnapped by Moslem terrorists in Beirut 16 months ago, has been freed and is safe in the United States, President Reagan announced yesterday.

Mr. Weir was released to U.S. authorities in Beirut last Saturday and secretly returned to the United States and reunited

with his family over the weekend, said White House spokesman Edward Djerejian.

Doctors found Mr. Weir, 61, "in very good mental and physical condition."

"We haven't given up hope for the release of the others," Mr. Djerejian said. "But it has become apparent that the other hostages were not going to be released in direct connection with the release of the Rev. Weir."

The announcement of Mr. Weir's release was delayed to avoid endangering six other American hostages being held in Lebanon, according to the White House.

"I talked with Reverend Weir on Air Force One this morning, and I'm happy for him and his family," Mr. Reagan said in Concord,

N.H., at the close of a campaign-style speech on tax reform.

"But I will not be satisfied and will not cease our efforts until all the hostages, the other six, are released," the president said.

A senior State Department official, speaking on condition that he not be named, told reporters yesterday that "a great deal" of behind-the-scenes activity within the administration had preceded Mr. Weir's release.

After talking with Mr. Weir, the official said, the administration is "working on the presumption" that the other six Americans still held in Lebanon are alive.

Before boarding the presidential plane at Manchester, N.H., for a return flight, Mr. Reagan was asked whether Syria helped secure Mr. Weir's freedom, as it had helped in the release of U.S. hostages taken in the June hijacking of a Trans World Airlines plane.

"I can't comment on that," Mr. Reagan said. But he then held up six fingers and said, "Six more to go."

After being whisked back to this country following his release, Mr. Weir reportedly was reunited with his wife and other members of his family in Norfolk, Va.

Mr. Weir is expected to speak at a press conference this morning in the sanctuary of the National Presbyterian Church on Nebraska Avenue in Northwest Washington.

Jeremy Levin, a Cable News Network bureau chief who escaped on Feb. 15 after nearly a year of captivity in Lebanon, said Mr. Weir's release was "a tremendous signal of hope for the others."

Mr. Levin, now on a leave of absence from CNN, said he and his wife Sis, who live in Washington, have been working full time to try to arouse more public concern about the plight of the "forgotten seven."

"We're waiting with incredible anticipation to hear what Ben will be saying tomorrow at his news conference in terms of the other hostages reaching their own freedom," Mr. Levin said in a telephone interview.

Mae Mihelich, sister of the Rev. Lawrence Martin Jenco of Joliet, Ill., who was kidnapped last Jan. 8, said Mr. Weir's release "gives us hope that they are doing some kind of negotiating with somebody."

"We're going to fight harder," she

said. "If they can do it for one, we're going to make sure they release all the other six. We are not going to give up hope."

Mr. Weir, 61, who had lived with his wife Carol in Beirut for 30 years and headed the Presbyterian Church's missionary program in Lebanon, was abducted near his home on May 8, 1984.

Mr. Weir and others kidnapped in Beirut during the past 16 months were believed to have been seized by Moslem gunmen to back their demands for the release of 17 men being held for bombing U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait.

Twelve other westerners — the six Americans, four Frenchmen, a Briton and an Italian — who have been kidnapped since March 1984 are believed still held in Lebanon.

Mr. Reagan also said yesterday that Vice President George Bush would meet the families of the other six hostages in Washington tomorrow.

The president declined to say whether U.S. officials know where the other six are being held or by whom.

On the flight to New Hampshire, a White House spokesman told reporters about President Reagan's five-minute telephone call to Mr.

Weir from aboard Air Force One.

Mr. Reagan was quoted as saying, "I want to express my joy and that of the American people at your freedom." He said the president also told Mr. Weir, "You're an inspiration to the people of this country and to all who might find themselves in situations of similar adversity."

The spokesman said Mr. Weir's release came without concessions to the terrorist who had kidnapped the missionary.

The Americans still missing are William Buckley, 56, political officer at the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, abducted March 18, 1984; Peter Kilburn, 60, librarian at the American University of Beirut, who disappeared Nov. 30, 1984; the Rev. Martin Lawrence Jenco, 50, director of Catholic Relief Services in Lebanon, kidnapped Jan. 8, 1985; Terry Anderson, 37, Beirut bureau manager for The Associated Press, seized March 16, 1985; David Jacobsen, 54, administrator of the American University Hospital in Beirut, kidnapped May 28, 1985; and Thomas Sutherland, 53, dean of the American University of Beirut's agriculture school, seized by gunmen June 9, 1985.

Staff writer Dave Doubrava contributed to this report.